

TEMPORARY EXHIBITION

CAMERA OF WONDERS

Elad Lassery, *Men (055, 065)* (detail), 2012. Silver gelatin print, mahogany frame.
Courtesy of the artist and Kadist Art Foundation



CAMERA OF WONDERS

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Galleries A, B and The Foundry

SEEING SIDEWAYS *

At the turn of the sixteenth century, a Danish doctor named Ole Worm took the earth and squeezed it into a single room in his home. The space brimmed with things of scientific interest, whimsically arranged. Natural specimens dangled from rafters and perched on shelves. Bones and minerals mingled with clockwork automata and botanic samples. Pelts from foreign mammals sat next to the tusks and horns of purportedly mythical creatures. Though Worm amassed the objects over the course of many years, when he arranged them side-by-side, time collapsed.

Museum Wormianum was just one of many such collections compiled in Europe during a time brightly characterized as the Age of Discovery. Technological advances allowed for trade across oceans, and as animals, plants, ideas, and cultures came into contact for the first time, their collision broadened European perspectives of the world and humanity's place within it. Encyclopedic knowledge suddenly seemed a real possibility, and the promise of increased understanding encouraged travelers to map the globe and catalogue its marvels.

As its history suggests, the *wunderkammer* is a form riddled with contradiction. The practice of accumulating objects from foreign lands encouraged wonder at the world's diversity, but it also cultivated uninformed desire for things produced by other cultures. Implicit in the activity of maintaining a cabinet was a complex dynamic between social connection and self-aggrandizement. Collectors doubled as docents and entertainers, who guided visitors through alternate realities by telling stories about the objects on display. By bringing together unrelated cultural artifacts and artworks, *wunderkammern* also blurred the boundaries between art, technology, and science, and freed up space for spectators to find unexpected relationships between things.

Two centuries later, another form similarly captured the spirit of its age, leaving an even more profound mark on the cultural landscape. In "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin describes photography as a disruptive medium, "the first truly revolutionary means of reproduction." Before cameras, the only way to convey a visual idea was to craft it manually (as with the cabinet) or illustrate it with pen and ink. Like *wunderkammern*, photographs combine magic and science. They have a similar power to transport the viewer, taking him or her to another place and time, a memory or a possible future.

Organized in 1955 by Edward Steichen, then-curator of photography at MoMA, the exhibition *The Family of Man* arranged images by both well-known and unknown photographers thematically, with the aim of showing universal threads that recur throughout time and across national borders. The exhibition was a call for peace that set out to visually demonstrate the speciousness of political, racial, economic, and cultural divisions. In a sense, the aims of *The Family of Man* were not unlike those of the *wunderkammer*: to contain and describe an entire universe in a single display.

The processing of visual information has become so viscerally ingrained in daily life that to simply state this fact is a truism. Everywhere, pictures are incorporated into digital feeds that strip them of context and level any hierarchy between them. Though we have access to a greater quantity of visual information than ever, our perspectives are at risk of becoming as insular as they were in the dark ages. Against this backdrop, the exercise of combining unlike things in the careful manner of the *wunderkammer* presents new potential.

Camera of Wonders is an associative arrangement of over 100 photographs from the Colección Isabel y Agustín Coppel (CIAC) and the Kadist Art Foundation. They are ordered to suggest formal connections, uniting artists across traditional divisions in much the same way that the *wunderkammer* frayed the edges between scientific and artistic disciplines. In a departure from the exhibition's historical precursors, *Camera of Wonders* refuses the prospect of a singular narrative. Photographs from decades ago are arrayed next to ones made today, and subject matter ranges widely. The stylized fashion photography of Paul Horst accompanies the portraiture by Diane Arbus appears next to botanical studies by Tom Baril. A linear historical narrative is absent, making possibilities for connection rife.

Some photographs feature their own internal kind of ordering. In Arabella Campbell's *Gradation* (2011), pleasing visual logic is applied to unruly natural phenomena. Berries are sequenced chromatically, from a ripe, inky blackberry to the sharp green of a new raspberry. Peter Fischli and David Weiss's *Über dem Abgrund* (1984–85) also indicates a progression; the photograph pictures a Rube Goldberg machine wound up with potential energy.

In one passage of the exhibition, a man's robes drape between his knees forming a conical tent. The shape, captured in an untitled mid-century image by Malian photographer Seydou Keita, apes the form of an anonymous woman in a burka, pictured two decades later by the American fashion photographer Irving Penn. The inverted cone of a water tower, photographed yet another twenty years later by Bernd and Hilla Becher, mirrors these forms again. One the structures from the Bechers' series is a water tower shot in a town called Berka, compounding the visual allusions with a linguistic one.

Artists can be seen using repetition to explore and disrupt thematic types, satirizing the way these kinds of categories flatten out difference. Elad Lassry's *Men* (055, 065) features two young, thin, male subjects in the same frame, dressed identically and identified only by number. Matt Lipps's *Untitled Women* is a technicolor, panoramic collage of various stylized and idealized depictions. In his iconic *New York City* (1966), Lee Friedlander situates an image within an image. A blonde woman is seen from behind with a sharp-edged shadow doubling her, threatening a violent encounter. An eerie kind of twinning is also present in Erwin Blumenfeld's *Legs à la Seurat* (*Maria Motherwell*), *New York* (1942). The disembodied limbs convey a sense of vulnerability and unease on their own, which is only heightened when viewed in relation to Friedlander's image.

Amid this environment, Jochen Lempert's *Un voyage en Mer du Nord* (A trip to the North Sea) (1997) dumps visitors into rough seas. The horizon line of the panoramic series stretches from picture to picture. Two behemoths list nearby. One is a massive cruise liner that slumps like a beached whale, bifurcated by the gap at the center of the diptych. The other is a life-sized plastic elephant precariously propped up by two-by-fours, with a wheeled cart as an unstable pedestal. Until placed side by side, these entities—pictured by Doug Aitken and Wimo Ambala Bayang respectively—have nothing to do with one another. One is mechanical, the other animal; one is seafaring, the other earthbound; one is situated in an unnamed ocean, the other on various backdrops within

Indonesia. *Sleeping Elephant In the Axis of Yogyakarta* is part of a series in which the same “sleeping” subject is pictured again and again, superimposed over a setting that shifts from image to image.

Resuscitated for today’s flattened visual landscape, the cabinet of curiosities offers an imaginative way of being in the world. It invites us to observe our own methods of encoding what we see, and to rediscover a capacity to look. The challenge of mending splintered attention and opening it outward is one for the artist–scientist–viewer, unafraid of the prospect of being uprooted and repositioned. The theater for viewing the “eternal aspect of all things” is indeed miniature, located in the faculties of each individual. The photographs, for their part, promise to meet us halfway.

Jens Hoffmann / Curator



Elina Brotherus, *Low Horizon 2* (fragment), 2000

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